

THE SENTINEL

The Great Sphinx of Ghizeh.

What is the meaning of that vast human head that rises out of the gleaming sand beside the great pyramid of Ghizeh? Hewn out of the solid limestone rock, it towers above you to a height of seventy feet, and it stretches away in the form of the body of a lion, to a length of one hundred and fifty feet in front of you. Sculptured with consummate skill, it reposes in graceful ease on the sand. The face gazes with a sublime patience and mystery into the far distance. Its features have been much mutilated by the ravages of time, and many of the finer lines have been worn away by the graving tool of the winds, holding as a cutting edge the desert sand. But still the eyes preserve their ancient human look of unathomable mystery and calm, eternal patience.

Why was this colossal figure constructed? Was it a mere caprice, or was it meant to express a definite purpose? That question is not involved in the meaning of its symbolic shape. The people who fashioned it we have reason to believe were astronomers as well as sculptors. They came from a land where the stars were first observed, and their phenomena studied in connection with the affairs of men; where the priests watched the rising and setting of sun and stars, in temples that were astronomical observatories, and were orientated to certain astral movements. The event of greatest importance in Egypt has always been the annual inundation of the Nile. The whole welfare of the country depended upon this event from time immemorial. We can imagine therefore how profound would be the interest manifested in everything associated with it, and especially in the signs in the heavens that indicated its approach. The two signs of the zodiac through which the sun passed at the time of this periodic flood were Leo and Virgo. May we not suppose then, that the woman's head and the lion's body were carved in the rock in the composite figure of the Sphinx, in order to represent the combination of these two constellations, as a perpetual heraldic record of the annual baptism and resurrection of the land, under the benignant influence of these auspicious stars?

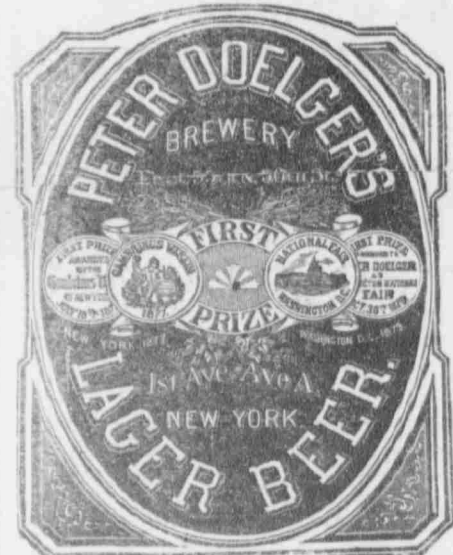
This theory is at least as plausible as any other that has been advanced; and there are several things that would seem to corroborate it. According to the primitive legend, the rise of the Nile is caused by the tears shed by Isis over the tomb of her brother Osiris. And the modern Egyptian still believes that during one night in the year, viz. June 17, a miraculous drop from heaven falls into the river, and causes it to overflow. This night is called the Lailat en Nuktah. May not Isis be the virgin whose countenance looks calmly at you from the body of the Sphinx? Probably in connection with this mourning of Isis, a heathen ceremony was performed for many ages, in which a virgin was yearly sacrificed to the divinity of the river. This human sacrifice, it is said, was abolished by Amer, the Mahometan general who took Cairo in 640, and a paper on which a prayer to the Nile was written was substituted. A relic of the old custom still survives in a pillar of earth, called the bride or girl, being left in the middle of the Khailg el Masri, the old canal that flows through the heart of Cairo, to be washed away by the incoming water, when the canal is opened to receive the overflow of the inundation of the Nile. This ceremony of the annual cutting of the Khaig takes place between the fifth and the fifteenth of August, and is performed with extraordinary pomp and splendor. All the great dignitaries of Egypt, including the Khedive, are present; and a brilliant display of artillery and a brilliant display of fireworks the embankment that blocks the mouth of the canal is removed by the hoes of Nubian slaves, and the dark waters rush rejoicingly in, filling the channel to the brim, and prophesying the bursting out of the whole land into verdure and fruitfulness. The ceremony is concluded by the Sheikh of Islam, thanking Allah for his goodness, and invoking a blessing upon the timeless flood, while a bag of silver piastres is thrown into the water, and is eagerly scrambled for by a crowd of divers. It was indeed a common custom of antiquity to offer human sacrifices to propitiate the divinity of a river, lest it should do damage by its overflow, or when a bridge was to be built over it, or a ferryboat established to ply upon its waters. This custom survived in Rome to a late period, when the salves of the Tiber as substitutes for human victims. And when the practice of throwing infants into the sea at the mouth of the Ganges, as a sacrifice to the goddess Gunga, was put an end to by the British authorities, the mother who made a vow to this representation of the river Ganges, cast a cocoanut into the waves as a substitute for the doomed child. But in the Egyptian ceremony of the yearly sacrifice of a virgin to the Nile, we can trace the custom to its earliest source; and perhaps it is not too far fetched to associate it with Isis and the female half of the great Sphinx of Ghizeh.

MATERIAL FROM SPACE.—Recent researches have gone far to render possible the assertion of Nordenskjöld and others, that a large portion of the earth's constituents may be of cosmic origin—that, in other words, in the course of ages, the distant stars and other heavenly bodies may have contributed of their substance to thicken the crust of our world. For example, at various times, and in various places, there has been collected from the snow a black powder containing metallic iron, and in some instances, cobalt and nickel, while on the "inland" ice which covers Greenland a peculiar mineral powder, named krookonite, mixed with grains of metallic iron, has been detected. This dust consists of small, angular, double-refracting crystal fragments, without any mixture of particles of glass, and is, therefore, very different from the glass dust that is commonly ejected from volcanoes. From these and similar data Nordenskjöld ventures on the assertion that not improbably, if this dust falls in an equal amount all over the globe—and though the snow enables it to be detected more easily than on the earth, there is no reason for supposing that it does not—something like half a million tons drop from the celestial spaces in the course of a year. The shooting stars must discharge an immense quantity of those luminous particles. For hours at a time we see them falling; and when we remember that this has been going on during unnumbered geological ages it is not impossible to regard it as an important factor in the history of our planet. In brief, it may be found "that a considerable quantity of the constituents of our sedimentary strata, especially of those that have been deposited in the open sea far from land, are of cosmic origin, and will throw an unexpected light on the origin of the finer details of the volcanoes, and afford a simple explanation of the remarkable resemblance which unmistakably exists between plutonic rocks and meteoric stones, namely, by showing that the principal material of the plutonic and volcanic rocks is of cosmic origin, and that the phenomena of heat which occur in these layers depend on chemical changes to which the cosmic sediment, after being covered by thick terrestrial formations, is subjected." Without quite homologating this idea, it is certain that meteoric, or native, iron is—and has from the remotest ages been—falling on the earth's surface from the immeasurably distant regions outside of our atmosphere.—Our Earth and its Story.

Possession Island and its Birds.

Chambers's Journal.

The coast line of Southwestern Africa for a very considerable distance north of the Cape of Good Hope presents but few features of interest; indeed, it may be described as a wearisome and monotonous picture of barren looking rocks, alternating with long, arid stretches of sand dunes, the desolation of the scene being completed by the angry surf, which with ceaseless and depressing rhythm beats upon the shore. At the same time, the atmosphere in these comparatively rainless latitudes is singularly pure and invigorating, one feels as if it were almost a luxury to breathe; and when night closes in the starry heavens present a glorious spectacle to the eye, while all around the vessel the sea flashes and sparkles with the phosphorescent rays emitted by countless forms of marine life. Possession Island, the largest of the group, is about five hundred miles of Cape town, and, viewed from a short distance off, looks uncommonly like a huge drab colored clincher set down in the ocean. It is crescent shaped, and shelters Elizabeth Bay from the westward, the mainland being well defined in the distance. On nearer approach one experiences a sensation akin to that induced by a theatrical transformation scene, the forbidding and apparently untenanted waste being alive with birds enjoying to the full the immunity secured from predatory foes, and showing but little signs of timidity from outside intrusion. Thousands upon thousands of penguins line the shore, strutting about with great self importance, and jealous, one might almost imagine, that Nature has not endowed them with the power of flight, like their comrades, the malagas, a very handsome bird about the size of an ordinary goose, and with much the same plumage, except that the head and neck are tinted with yellowish feathers. Enormous flocks of these malagas are to be seen in every direction, either standing in solid groups, covering a large extent of ground, or wheeling about in the air, now and then darting out seawards in quest of fish, upon which they pounce with unerring accuracy. Then there are various kinds of gulls, guillemots, and other sea birds. In July and August is the breeding season, and it is not till later in the year that the islands are what is technically called "in full bloom," when the birds are more numerous than ever. Some of the habits of the penguin are very peculiar. Their nests consist of a hole scratched in the sand, or just a crevice in the rock, into which they drag a few stones, pieces of seaweed, or any rubbish available; and here they deposit two, or at the most three, eggs, the period of incubation lasting six weeks. When the young birds are hatched, they very quickly take to the water. Shortly after the breeding season is concluded the work of collecting the guano or excrement begins; and this on the larger islands furnishes employment for thirty or forty hands, the ranks being recruited from all sorts and conditions of men, even a broken down barrister having been known to cast in his lot among these untoward surroundings. At the time of the visit of the commission there were over 2,000 tons of guano stacked on this island in a large heap, representing a money value of close upon £15,000. At one time Possession Island must have been the haunt of innumerable quantities of seals, for the remains of these creatures are to be seen in all directions, abundantly confirming the statement of Captain Morrell, who, when describing his visit here, many years since, said, "I saw the effects of a pestilence or plague which had visited these inhabitants of the ocean with as much malignancy as the Asiatic cholera does the bipeds of the land. The whole island was literally covered with the carcasses of fur seals with their skins still on them."



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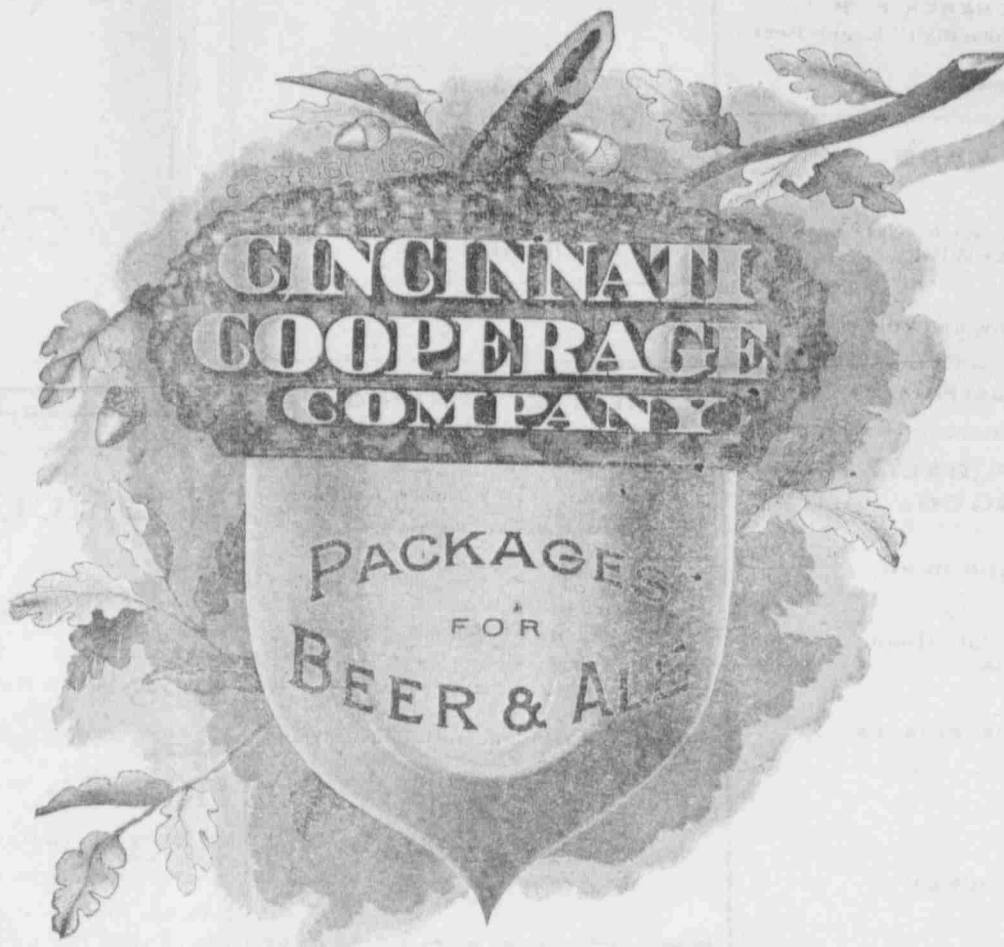
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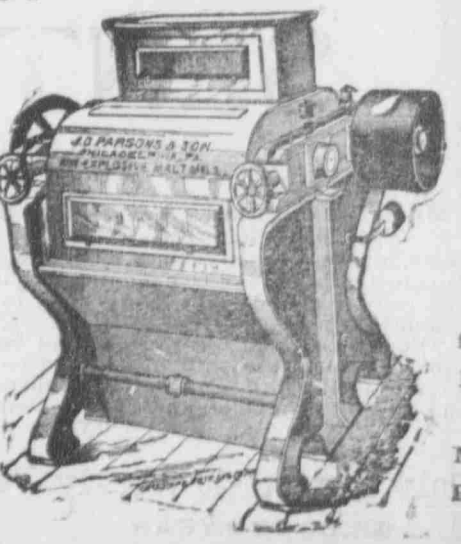
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